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SUBJECT: A MONTH FROM ELECTIONS, BANGLADESH'S POLITICAL
FORECAST IS EXTREMELY CLOUDY

REF: A. DHAKA 1173
[B](#). DHAKA 1158
[C](#). DHAKA 1155

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) Although Parliamentary elections are fast approaching, many Bangladeshis remain deeply uncertain about prospects for a return to democracy. The most likely scenario remains elections on or about the set date of December 18, but the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has yet to say whether it will participate. This cable considers a number of possible scenarios. Bangladeshi politicians of all stripes acknowledge the United States can play an important role in continuing to promote free, fair, credible and timely elections. Two upcoming visits by senior USG officials will provide an excellent opportunity to encourage responsible political behavior in the critical weeks ahead. The outcome is vital to U.S. Government interests because a politically stable Bangladesh -- a moderate, Muslim-majority country in a dicey part of the world -- is critical to the Global War on Terror.

DECEMBER ELECTIONS STILL MOST LIKELY SCENARIO...

[1](#)2. (C) Parliamentary elections in December remain the most likely political scenario for Bangladesh. The two top Caretaker Government advisers negotiating the terms of the election with political parties, Communications Adviser Maj. Gen. (retired) Ghulam Quader and Education Adviser Hosasin Zillur Rahman, told Ambassador Moriarty on November 12 the Caretakers remained committed to holding elections December 18 (Reftel A). Media reports on November 13 and Embassy sources, however, indicate the Government might be willing to postpone the elections by a week to entice the BNP to participate.

[1](#)3. (C) The big question is whether the BNP will participate. The party, under former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, has sent mixed signals on its bottom-line terms. Its top leaders have offered a bewildering and often contradictory list of demands. Perhaps the most authoritative voice, Zia adviser Mahmudur Rahman, told PolEcon Counselor that the party's three main demands were completely lifting the State of Emergency in effect since January 2007; curbing the Election Commission's power to unilaterally disqualify candidates; and delaying local elections now scheduled for December 28 by a month. Importantly, he said the Emergency could be lifted after nomination papers were filed, effectively killing the

possible candidacy of BNP leaders convicted of corruption. Rahman appeared to leave room for compromise. November 13 media reports of a possible summit between Zia and her longtime nemesis, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina, suggested the door was at least slightly ajar for a last-minute deal.

14. (C) Two senior BNP advisers have privately told Embassy PolOffs the elections could be postponed to February 2009 to give the party adequate time to prepare. Such a lengthy delay seems unlikely for several reasons. The BNP's main rival, the Awami League, is confident of victory in December Parliamentary elections. Its leaders have said repeatedly the vote must be held December 18 as planned. Meanwhile, Advisers Quader and Zillur said they and their colleagues in the Caretaker Government were uninterested in serving beyond the end of the year. Finally, any delay into the new year would trigger a required update of the national voter's list that would push back any elections until at least mid-March.

...BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF THE BNP BOYCOTTS?

15. (C) Quader told the Ambassador he believed the BNP would not take part in December 18 elections because it simply was not ready. Indeed, the party must make a decision within days if it is to meet the November 20 deadline for submitting candidate nominations. Zia advisers who support a boycott point to history for support. They note that a last-minute BNP boycott of Parliamentary elections organized by former

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military dictator Ershad in 1986 burnished the party's image and led to its success in elections two years later. Similarly, the Awami League boycotted the Parliamentary vote in February 1996 yet prevailed in elections four months later. The lesson from recent Bangladesh history is that boycotts work.

16. (C) A boycott this year, however, could well lead to a major reshaping of the political landscape that would leave the BNP substantially weakened. Should Zia call for a boycott, party reformers and the BNP's most important ally, the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami, would have to quickly decide whether to defy her and contest the election anyway. Scores of former BNP members of Parliament are in the reformist camp and could decide to campaign as independents or with smaller reform-minded parties, including the Liberal Democratic Party and the Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh Party, each led by former BNP members. Jamaat would be uncomfortable campaigning outside its alliance with the BNP, but some Jamaat leaders have said their party might contest the election anyway to ensure it remained engaged in the democratic process. Jamaat would be much less competitive running on its own, but Quader suggested the Awami League could help the Islamists win at least a few seats to ensure their presence in Parliament.

17. (S/NF) Should the BNP boycott, the big question would be whether its activists head into the streets to disrupt the election. BNP leaders have urged supporters to prepare for elections and "movement," a word loaded with the possibility of violent protest. Education Adviser Zillur told the Embassy's locally engaged political specialist that a boycott would pose a security risk. Bangladesh politics has a history of electoral violence; bloody labor strikes, called hartals, were largely responsible for the cancellation of elections in January 2007 and imposition of the State of Emergency. In his discussion with our political specialist, Zillur hinted that another outpouring of violence could trigger a military coup. At his subsequent meeting with the Ambassador, however, he and Quader said all government and political leaders were committed to elections. Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed in meetings with USG officials has repeatedly voiced strong support for the elections. Still, many Bangladeshis suspect the Directorate General of Forces

Intelligence (DGFI) could seek to foil the elections. They are particularly wary of its former head of counterintelligence, Gen. A.T.M Amin, who has tirelessly tried to manipulate politics to ensure the next Parliament supported Caretaker Government political reforms and did not seek revenge against those in power during the State of Emergency.

COMMENT: PUTTING ON THE FULL-COURT PRESS FOR DEMOCRACY

18. (C) With only weeks to go before Parliamentary elections, the U.S. Government needs to conduct a full-court press in support for a free, fair and credible vote. We will continue to meet with a broad range of major players, particularly leaders of the political parties, to urge them to participate in the elections and refrain from violence. The November 22-24 visit of Principal Deputy Secretary Donald Camp of the State Department's South and Central Asia Bureau is perfectly timed to reinforce the Embassy message at the highest levels of government and with the political parties. During his November 19-21 visit, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense James Clad will be able to impress upon military leaders the need to support a smooth and timely return to democracy. The coming 10 days may not shake the world, but they will go a long way in determining the next chapter in Bangladesh's history.

Moriarty